WORLD RELIGIONS PEACE

THE MAGAZINE FOR THE 10TH WORLD ASSEMBLY OF RELIGIONS FOR PEACE

20-23 AUGUST, 2019 IN LINDAU
DEAR READER,

Each and every one of you will agree that it is better to talk with each other than to settle disputes with violence. Religions for Peace has been promoting that principle for 50 years. I am convinced that the search for a more peaceful and just world remains vitally important. It is a search that the guests of the 10th World Assembly of Religions for Peace, which is taking place in Germany for the first time ever, will continue. I am pleased that the Foundation Peace Dialogue of the World Religions and Civil Society can make a contribution.

The peacemakers aren’t just interested in symbolism in Lindau this August. They intend to take concrete steps – on conference stages, in workshops and, in some cases, behind closed doors. The primary focus will be on the role of women as peacemakers, the consequences of climate change for peaceful coexistence, global equity and peace.

We would like to thank the German Bundestag, the Bavarian Landtag, the Federal Foreign Office, the Bavarian state government and German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who will open the 10th World Assembly.

Our hope is that Lindau will become a place of lasting interreligious dialogue and of progress toward peace. If we are successful in strengthening peace and in putting non-violence at the center of our thoughts and actions, then the 10th World Assembly will have been a success.

Ulrich Schneider
Director of the Foundation Peace Dialogue of the World Religions and Civil Society

Cultural policy is social policy. That is why Germany’s international cultural policy is increasingly looking to civil society. Impulses from civil society help us create a foreign policy of societies, as Willy Brandt envisioned.

That is why the German Bundestag supports programs such as those aimed at strengthening cooperation with civil society in countries belonging to the Eastern Partnership, the strategic dialogue with foundations and our activities relating to the societal responsibility of religious communities.

Religious communities are the largest civil society institutions in the world, and beyond all questions of faith, the focus needs to be on their responsibility within and between societies! Yet faith and spirituality are also resources of human action that we must recognize and respect.

The 10th World Assembly of Religions for Peace in Lindau unites representatives of a wide variety of religions from all parts of the world who are transforming their concern for the future of peace in the world into concrete action on behalf of peace. We are excited about this form of cooperation. May Lindau become a microcosm of interreligious cooperation from which we can learn and which can send a signal from Lindau calling for a more peaceful and just world!

Dr. Andreas Görgen
Head of the Culture and Communication Division at the Federal Foreign Office

RELIGIONS FOR PEACE is the largest worldwide alliance of religious communities. The global network consists of close to 100 national member associations in almost as many countries, six regional interfaith committees, as well as the Global Women of Faith Network and a Global Interfaith Youth Network. A World Council, whose members consist of leading religious leaders from all over the globe, is responsible for implementing the decisions between the world assemblies that take place every six years.

RELIGIONS FOR PEACE works in cooperation with international organizations and governments. The non-governmental organization has been accredited with the United Nations since 1973. Its main focus areas lie in conflict transformation, the promotion of fair and harmonious societies, sustainable human development, environmental protection and the improvement of Shared Well-Being.

Religions for Peace

www.rfp.org
Salaam alaikum, or “peace be upon you,” is the peaceful greeting of Islam. The Prophet Muhammad also used the greeting when addressing those of other faiths and urged Muslims to propagate it. God desires peace for all people, as it says in surah 22: 40. “If Allah were not to repel some through others, monasteries and churches and synagogues and mosques, wherein the name of Allah is much mentioned, would certainly have been pulled down. Allah will most certainly help those who will help Him.” God does not want us to fight or to prevent each other from observing our faith. He wants those who will help Him. God does not want us to fight or to prevent each other from observing our faith. He wants us to compete in doing good (surah 2: 148). And He wants that from all people. That is why we must harness our energies to stand together against injustice and oppression and make the world a better place. The world has been entrusted to people by God.

In the Talmud, it says “Whoever saves one life, saves the world entire.” This quote can very much be read as a message of peace. Applying oneself for a peaceful world and making the world just a bit better are core missions of Judaism. Just as peace is also a fundamental commandment of other world religions as well. But how can that commandment be fulfilled in today’s world? How can religions contribute and where is this commandment being violated in the name of religion? At the 10th World Assembly of Religions for Peace in Lindau, we can seek to answer these questions – together. In this spirit, I wish all participants in the World Assembly a fruitful exchange, much success and wonderful days on the shores of Lake Constance!

We live in a world that is growing ever closer together. Modern means of transportation and communication enable connections between people and companies, between societies and nations. International migration brings people of different religions and cultures together geographically. It is a process that presents significant opportunities, but is in no way indubitably peaceful. Globalization can also result in division and alienation around the world. And the religions of the world? Given the movements around the globe, their messages have a special role to play. Will they be forces for peace or for discord? Will they serve reconciliation or enmity? The 10th World Assembly of Religions for Peace in Lindau will address these questions, which are vital for world peace. It is a symbol of the increasingly urgent desire of religions to be peacemakers. And it is a symbol that is more imperative than ever.
T
de history of Religions for Peace stretches way back to the 1960s. It was an eventful decade, and a
threatening one: The Cold War had divided the world into friend and foe and the two superpowers were fighting
deploy wars in Asia in addition to aiming their nuclear weapons at the major cities of their enemy. Even though memories
of World War II were still painfully fresh, many believed that a new war – one which could end in nuclear annihilation – was
a realistic possibility. At the same time, it was also a period of political and social upheaval. In the United States, thousands
were protesting against racial segregation and the Vietnam War, while in Africa, numerous countries were freeing themselves
from colonial rule. And across the globe – in Europe, North America and Asia – spiritual leaders were beginning to look for
new answers to the world’s crises.

“Independently of each other, religious communities and some of their leaders began focusing on the idea that global challenges demanded a global alliance of the different religions,” says the American theologian William Vendley, the long-time Secretary General of Religions for Peace. In the U.S., a small group of religious leaders set out to campaign in different faith communities around the world for an interreligious conference aimed at filling the need for a new, interreligious organization. And so, in 1970, the American theologian William Vendley founded an international nongovernmental organization headquartered in New York: Religions for Peace.

At this first conference in Japan, the delegates founded an international nongovernmental organization headquartered in New York: Religions for Peace. In the ensuing years, it grew continuously and expanded its activities. Since then, a congress has been held roughly every five years in a variety of different locations: Princeton and Nairobi, Melbourne and Rome, Amman and Vienna. The executive committee of the organization and the World Council, which includes leading representatives of all religious communities, are responsible for implementing the resolutions made at these world assemblies.

Since its founding in 1970, the organization has gone through a number of different phases. The first lasted roughly until the end of the Cold War, says Secretary General William Vendley. “In that period, Religious for Peace concentrated primarily on publicity work on behalf of peace,” he says. “Members traveled together to Moscow, Washington, Brussels and other cities to send a joint message of peace against the terror of the Cold War.”

With the fall of the Iron Curtain and the collapse of the Soviet empire, the threats changed. In the political vacuum that emerged in the former Eastern Bloc states, new conflicts erupted along ethnic, linguistic and religious fault lines. “A new historical phase began in which religious identity was used to achieve political aims,” says Vendley. This is also when Vendley’s own history with Religions for Peace began. Having served as a professor of theology at a number of U.S. universities, Vendley took on the position of Secretary General of the organization in 1994. “It didn’t take long before he found himself faced with significant challenges,” he says. In 1995, Serbian soldiers and militias murdered over 8,000 Bosniaks in Srebrenica, a crime that former United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan would later describe as the worst massacre on European soil since the end of World War II. The Dayton Accords officially ended the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina a few months later, but the traumatic violence left behind deep rifts of hate and distrust between Christian and Muslim communities.

“We asked ourselves: What unique spiritual and moral advantages, which social infrastructures of religious communities could be useful in combating these new forms of violence?” Vendley recalls. He arrived at the answer himself. Shortly after the end of the war, he traveled to Bosnia to meet with the leaders of various religious communities, including Roman Catholics,

Representatives of different faith communities founded Religions for Peace 50 years ago. Their goal: To establish peace across all confessional boundaries. A look back shows just how much the challenges have changed since then.

The photograph was taken in the Kutupalong-Balukhali refugee camp in Bangladesh. The girl belongs to the Rohingya Muslim minority, who fled from violent soldiers in Myanmar to the neighboring country in 2017. Over 710,000 people have been living in such camps ever since. It is uncertain when they will be able to return to their homeland.
Serbian Orthodox, Muslims and Jews. “For the initial meetings, I always brought along a spiritual authority from Religions for Peace of the same faith to convince the religious leaders, we want to establish harmony and dignity and respect.”

In recent years, the organization has focused more on involving women and young people in its activities. In 2001, female delegates founded the Religions for Peace Global Women of Faith Network, which includes over 1,000 women’s religious organizations around the world. In Sierra Leone, women from the network helped negotiate a peaceful end to the civil war that had raged in the country from 1991 to 2002. “It is a huge step forward that every religious community has experienced. Only when these people felt that I was showing understanding and sympathy for their suffering could I begin working with them.”

After numerous meetings, he was able to bring leaders of the four religious communities together at the same table. These initial meetings, which took place away from the public eye, ultimately gave birth to the Interreligious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which continues its work today. “That initiated the second phase of Religions for Peace,” says Vendley. “The mobilization of religious communities for concrete conflict resolution and peace-making.”

Today, Religions for Peace is active in 70 countries. Numerous branches organize on the international, national and local levels on a broad array of issues, from environmental protection to the fight against HIV/AIDS to women’s rights and conflict resolution. Members of Religions for Peace help out after natural disasters such as those that took place in Haiti, Nepal and Japan, and mediate in conflict regions like Sierra Leone, Liberia, Somalia, Uganda, Rwanda, South Africa, Myanmar, Iraq, Syria and Israel and the Palestinian territories, offers out of the public eye. Each project is rooted in the organization’s five principles: respect religious differences; act on deeply held and widely shared values; preserve the identity of each religious community; honor the different ways religious communities are organized; and support locally led multireligious structures.

In 2001, the organization launched the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative. The initiative, which brings together religious authorities, indigenous peoples, national and international organizations around the world. We got started from the public eye, ultimately gave birth to the Interreligious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which continues its work today. “That initiated the second phase of Religions for Peace,” says Vendley. “The mobilization of religious communities for concrete conflict resolution and peace-making.”

The theme of the 10th World Assembly of Religions for Peace is “Caring for Our Common Future: Advocating Shared Well-Being.”

One of the most important issues on the global agenda is the protection of the environment. What can interreligious initiatives like Religions for Peace contribute to the debate? In all religions, there is a fact-based understanding of the climate crisis and a deep reflection on the sanctity of nature. During the negotiations of the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement, representatives of all important religions were present and spoke with a single voice. More than any other present-day issue, and perhaps any issue in history, the climate crisis has brought together authorities, scholars and followers of all religions.

How can this interfaith consensus be translated into action? Two years ago, Religions for Peace launched the Rainforest Initiative, which brings together religious authorities, indigenous peoples, academic institutions and governments. We got started in Colombia and Peru and are currently developing projects in Brazil, Congo and Indonesia. It is an extremely dynamic program in which faith and science, religious communities and indigenous peoples, national governments and the United Nations are all striving to protect our rainforests, the lungs of the world. An additional issue that fuels controversy in many places is the immigration of people of other faiths. In this context, religion appears to divide people more than it unites them. The current situation is dramatic. In some countries, national and religious identities are being abused to spark conflict and raise new walls. The biggest question that is currently being asked in many European countries is: How can we, the most privileged continent in the world, keep migrants and asylum-seekers away? In the moral court of history, this attitude will be difficult to defend. I hope that the 10th World Assembly will be able to find a clear, principled voice calling for respect for people of other faiths and origins and for a fair solution to the migration question.

To finish off, let’s take a look into the future. What challenges do you think Religions for Peace should address next? Poverty remains an important issue. An additional key issue is the role of women in society and women’s rights. In a spiritual, values-based dialogue, representatives of all religions say that women and men are equal when it comes to human dignity. But in practice, religions apply this conviction quite differently. That is why we have to continue this important dialogue with great respect and humility.

Interview by Maritelle Engdahl

“I HOPE WE FIND A CLEAR, PRINCIPLED VOICE”

Gunnar Stålsett, born in 1935, is a Lutheran theologian and was the Bishop of Oslo from 1998 to 2005. Today, he is the Honorary President of the World Council of Religions for Peace. We spoke with him about the organization’s contributions to the greatest challenges facing humanity.
The 10th World Assembly of Religions for Peace is taking place in August in Lindau. The organizers are hoping for open dialogue – at the event, in the city and on the internet.

When spiritual and worldly leaders meet for this year’s 10th World Assembly of Religions for Peace in the city of Lindau, they will address the most significant questions facing us in the 21st century. How can war be prevented and poverty eliminated? What can we do to curb extremism and expand the role of women? How can we save our planet? It is an ambitious agenda that the largest interreligious non-governmental organization in the world has set for itself for its 10th World Assembly, which will take place on the shores of Lake Constance from August 20-23. And the guest list is equally impressive, including 900 religious authorities from 100 countries in addition to 100 representatives of national governments, international organizations and groups from civil society.

German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier will attend, as will the American economist Jeffrey D. Sachs and Nobel Peace Prize laureate José Ramos-Horta, the former President of East Timor. Representatives of Bahá’í, Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Taoism and many other religions will discuss with actors from politics and civil society how interreligious initiatives can contribute to solving the greatest challenges of our time. The meeting’s motto is: “Caring for our Common Future: Advancing Shared Well-Being.”

The focus will not be on theological debate, but on concrete engagement. “Religion cannot lose the connection to present-day challenges,” says William Vendley, the long-time Secretary General of Religions for Peace. As such, the primary goal of the 10th World Assembly is that of launching and deepening interreligious collaborations that overcome cultural, linguistic and religious boundaries and which result in joint projects – whether it be environmental protection in Peru, reconciliation in Myanmar or the promotion of women’s rights in the Arab world. “The fundamental question is: Can religion answer the big questions that affect us all, like climate protection and sustainable development?” asks Vendley. “Do religious communities contribute to the common welfare?”

The 10th World Assembly is to answer these questions with a decisive “yes!” That is why the agenda includes a special session entitled: “Women as Peacemakers in the Middle East.” Although women are engaged in a variety of ways in initiatives for civil society, environmental protection and peace, they are often shut out of decisions-making processes and their voices go unheard. To include the oft-untapped potential of women in peace processes, the assembly intends to take the initial step of establishing a network of influential women representing various religions from the Middle East and North Africa.

The assembly brings people together who otherwise may never have encountered each other. Invitations have been extended to representatives from Israel, Iran and the United Arab Emirates – countries that are officially hostile to one another. “That is one of the distinctive features of this event: It creates a space to exchange a few words even with people with whom you are officially not on speaking terms,” says Ulrich Schneider. The 46-year-old is the director of the Foundation Peace Dialogue of the World Religions and Civil Society, founded in 2000. The organization is the co-host of the 10th World Assembly in Lindau along with the central office of Religions for Peace in New York. Chairman of the Foundation is Wolfgang Schürer of Switzerland, formerly the head of the Lindau Nobel Laureate Meetings. After the 10th World Assembly, the Foundation Peaceful Dialogue will support the work of Religions for Peace in Germany and Europe and focus on interreligious dialogue projects.

Many German guests are also expected at the 10th World Assembly, including representatives of the German chapter of Religious for Peace, the Round Table of Religions in Germany. For decades, the volunteer organization has been bringing together Christians, Jews and Muslims for interreligious projects. “We also hope to use the assembly to discuss future plans for Germany,” says Schneider. “We would like to increase recruitment and involvement of younger members to initiate generational change.”

The site of the meeting was chosen with care: Lindau, a picturesque town of 25,000 residents and a surfeit of half-timbered houses on the shore of Lake Constance, lies in the heart of Europe between three countries. The beautiful natural surroundings highlight the urgency of one of the largest topics on the assembly agenda, the protection of the environment. Most of the financing for the conference comes from the Foundation Peaceful Dialogue and from Religions for Peace along with subsidies from the German Foreign Ministry and the state of Bavaria.

The 10th World Assembly’s principles include openness, which also means inviting the local population to actively participate. That is why the opening and closing sessions, along with four plenary events, will be open to the public and can also be streamed on the website www.ringforpeace.org. In addition, visitors to the Agora, the square in front of the event location, can meet the delegates or take part in the “long table of religions,” which is being present by the Catholic and Evangelical churches for the enjoyment of neighbors, visitors and participants.

“Religion cannot limit its engagement to the publication of statements,” says Gunnar Stålsett, Honorary President of Religions for Peace. In times of interreligious conflict, spiritual representatives from around the world are hoping the 10th World Assembly in Lindau will send the message that religions have something to say about the global challenges of the 21st century – and that they can move mountains when they combine their powers rather than direct them against each other.
She is one of those people who, once you’ve met, you’ll never forget. Radiant, bursting with energy and full of optimism, Meherzia Labidi Maïza is used to doing the unexpected and is a specialist for deadlocked situations. “I am extremely enthusiastic. I think that we will take a huge step forward at the conference in Lindau. ‘That would already be a greatest breakthrough will come in a different conflict. At this conference, we will be focusing our attentions on Africa, especially on Nigeria. We hope to bring together the unleashing of the positive energies of religions. That and dialogue represent the foundations of Religions for Peace.”

Some see the enthusiastic Labidi Maïza not primarily as someone who brings people together but as a representative of one of the conflict parties. Hardliners from the Saudi-led camp see the Tunisian Ennahda party as part of the movement connected to the Muslim Brotherhood and as such allied with Qatar. “That’s nonsense,” says Labidi Maïza. “Plus, what use are the doubts and mistrust? It brings us no further. We are concerned about humanity and improving people’s lives. We have to be open and receptive to others.”

She says her Ennahda party stands for the compatibility of democracy and Islam. Only recently, the party officially recognized the division between religion and politics. “You know, religion and faith can do so much good for people. Quite frequently, though, they are subsumed by traditions that serve first and foremost to put certain groups in power or keep them there,” she says. As such, she believes that freeing religions from adverse traditions is a precondition for achieving that which she refers to as the unleashing of the positive energies of religions. That and dialogue represent the foundations of Religions for Peace.

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Faith is frequently the trigger for violent conflict. To change that, we must prevent one thing above all else: the marginalization of people.

Accordingly, when addressing the question of how to tackle the violent abuse of religion, the question that must be addressed is precisely why religions all too often do not play the role they should, especially in conflicts of conflict in our world. Why do religious attachments seem so frequently to exacerbate conflicts, rather than help resolve them and promote the peace that is the most essential of orientations that ostensibly is their métier?

Religion has been described by notable social scientists in terms of the “three Bs” — belief, behavior and belonging. And different religions may combine or emphasize them differently. The abuse of religion has often been related to the first two of these. It cannot be denied that arguments over doctrine, and even ritual, have led to violent clashes, and even today are used as a pretext for violence towards those who do not share the same beliefs and practices.

However, violence in the name of religion, especially in our modern world, usually has far more to do with “belonging” and reflects the sociocultural, territorial and political contexts in which religion functions.

Because religion seeks to give meaning and purpose to who we are, it is inextricably bound up with all the different components of human identity, from the most basic, such as family, through the larger components of communities, ethnic groups, nations and peoples, to the widest components of humanity and creation as a whole. These components of human identity are the building blocks of our psycho-spiritual well-being and we deny them at our peril. Scholars studying the modern human condition have pointed out just how much the counterculture, drug abuse, violence, cults, etc., are a search for identity on the part of the disoriented who have lost traditional compasses of orientation. These components of our identity affirm who we are, but by definition, they also affirm who we are not. Whether the perception of distinction and difference is viewed positively or negatively depends overwhelmingly on the context in which we find ourselves or perceive ourselves to be.

In contexts of conflict, identity tends to be not just a nurturer of positive affiliation, but also a vehicle for self-righteousness and disparagement of “the other.”

The image I find useful in explaining the behavior of particular identities for good or bad is that of a spiral. These different components of identity are like circles within circles. When they feel secure within the wider context in which they find themselves, they can affirm, open up and contribute to the broader context; families engaging other families, communities working together with other communities; nations contributing to the commonweal of nations; and religions affirming all human dignity within the family of humankind.

However, when these components of human identity do not feel comfortable in the broader context, they cut themselves off from it, isolating themselves and invariably denigrating the other(s), thus compounding the sense of alienation.

Because religion is bound up with identity, it plays a key role in nurturing identity when it is threatened.

Because religion is the chief antidote to violence and conflict.

Most people of religious faith would surely recognize that breaking conflict and violence against others is precisely what their religion demands.

I n his message for the 2002 World Day of Peace, Saint John Paul II declared that “genuine religious belief ... is the chief antidote to violence and conflict.” Most people of religious faith would surely share this view. All the world religions declare that their goal is peace, harmony and the well-being of human society. Yet we cannot ignore the fact that not only has terrible violence been perpetrated in the name of religion, but there are also not few adherents of religions in different parts of the world today who actually believe that conflict and violence against others is precisely what their religion demands.

The threat of violence, of course, demands that necessary steps for self-defense are taken. And many, if not most, would argue that sometimes there is no moral recourse in the short term but to paradoxically use violence to stem violence. Nevertheless, all our religions teach that this is not good enough. In the ancient Jewish text “The Father, According to Rabbi Nathan,” it is written in Chapter 23: “Who is the true hero? The one who turns an enemy into a friend.”

Combating violent extremism demands maximal efforts to drain the swamps of alienation — economic and political marginalization, and so on — in which the seeds of conflict germinate. As previously mentioned, though, the source of the alienation threatening societies today goes beyond such material and political factors. The psychology of rejection is arguably the most potent of all sources of alienation, and it is not possible to understand the hostility that exists among certain extremist militant groups — groups that find their succor and inspiration in religion — if one ignores the power of this alienation, this sense of degration and humiliation.

As such, it is not only essential that people, especially the younger generation, are enabled to live lives of material and social dignity, but it is no less important that they feel a sense of connectedness to and responsibility for their wider society, both as individuals and as part of their respective communities.

In this regard, interfaith relations have a critical role to play. The value of hospitality is central to all religious traditions. Reaching out to welcome the other gives communities and their members a sense that they are accepted by other communities and helps them feel part of, and contribute to, the wider circle of identity rather than be alienated from it. When this is combined with respect for the spiritual core identity of the other, it has even greater impact and significance.

Interfaith collaboration thus plays an invaluable role in enabling people and communities of different faiths to view their own religious identities and sense of belonging as vehicles for a constructive contribution to, and enhancement for, the well-being of society as a whole.
THREE QUESTIONS FOR ...

LAURA VARGAS
REPRESENTATIVE OF THE INTERFAITH RAINFOREST INITIATIVE IN PERU

What is the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative and what does it have to do with religion? The initiative was founded two years ago at an assembly in Oslo to protect rainforests in different parts of the world. Religious authorities from Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism took part, along with climate scientists, rainforest experts and representatives from indigenous peoples. I represent the organization in Peru, but it is also active in Colombia and will soon get started in Brazil, Indonesia and Congo. Peru is home to the fourth largest rainforest in the world, but almost 5,000 square kilometers are logged each year, most of it illegally. It’s a tragedy. We work together with authorities from all local religious communities, with indigenous peoples and with politicians to put a stop to illegal logging.

What is the joint message that the different religions can agree on when it comes to the environment? We are at a turning point. This is a dramatic moment in history and we all have to realize that climate change and environmental protection cannot wait any longer. Different religions are getting involved because this task is just as important as the principles of our faith and our daily religious activities. I believe, in fact, that protection of the environment – God’s creation – is itself a religious activity and thus an obligation for all of us.

What is your hopes for this year’s 10th World Assembly of Religions for Peace in Lindau? I think that the World Assembly should send a strong message to all religious communities that they believe, in fact, that protection of the environment – God’s creation – is itself a religious activity and thus an obligation for all of us.

SHEIKH SHABAN RAMADHAN MUBAJE
GRAND MUFTI, UGANDA MUSLIM SUPREME COUNCIL

You have been involved in the fight against HIV/AIDS for many years. What is your approach? Other religious leaders and I use our religious teachings to explain to people how they can avoid becoming infected. The first method is abstinence. For those who are married, we urge that they remain faithful to their partners. And the third option is the use of condoms. That is somewhat controversial for us Muslims because condoms are associated with extramarital relationships. But we nevertheless embrace this option as a way of fighting the illness. We also work together with governments, international organizations and medical experts. The battle against HIV/AIDS in Uganda is now seen as a success story. We are delivering the help that those who need it.

Are you better able to convince people than, say, doctors or social workers? Every person in Uganda is God-fearing, from the president to the simple citizen. That is why we religious leaders are able to reach people's hearts. Plus, we have organizational structures from the highest religious authority down to the smallest village that we can use to effectively disseminate our messages among the people.

You are one of the founders of the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda. How has the council been able to influence relationships between different faith communities since its founding in 2001?

Mustafa Cerić
FORMER GRAND MUFTI OF BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

What is your view of the current Christian-Muslim tensions in Europe against the background of your own experiences with interreligious conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina? There is currently fear in Europe’s Jewish and Muslim communities about the rise of the political right wing. Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, two old phenomena, are reappearing in a new form. Nevertheless, I am optimistic that Europe will remain true to the three principles that I believe define human rights, reconciliation and democracy.

What is the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative and what does it have to do with religion? The initiative was founded two years ago at an assembly in Oslo to protect rainforests in different parts of the world. Religious authorities from Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism took part, along with climate scientists, rainforest experts and representatives from indigenous peoples. I represent the organization in Peru, but it is also active in Colombia and will soon get started in Brazil, Indonesia and Congo. Peru is home to the fourth largest rainforest in the world, but almost 5,000 square kilometers are logged each year, most of it illegally. It’s a tragedy. We work together with authorities from all local religious communities, with indigenous peoples and with politicians to put a stop to illegal logging.

What is the joint message that the different religions can agree on when it comes to the environment? We are at a turning point. This is a dramatic moment in history and we all have to realize that climate change and environmental protection cannot wait any longer. Different religions are getting involved because this task is just as important as the principles of our faith and our daily religious activities. I believe, in fact, that protection of the environment – God’s creation – is itself a religious activity and thus an obligation for all of us.

What is your hopes for this year’s 10th World Assembly of Religions for Peace in Lindau? I think that the World Assembly should send a strong message to all religious communities that they believe, in fact, that protection of the environment – God’s creation – is itself a religious activity and thus an obligation for all of us.

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When this magazine went to print, the “Ring for Peace” only existed as a 3D-printed model. It is the template for a 7.5-meter tall sculpture made from 36 different kinds of wood from around the world and designed by Gisbert Baarmann of Templin, Germany. It will be installed in Luitpold Park in Lindau for the 10th World Assembly of Religions for Peace.

The interreligious opening ceremony will take place on August 20 at the “Ring for Peace.” The event will focus on the protection of religious sites around the world. The spot will become a new place for interreligious encounters – in Lindau, on the island in Lake Constance, in the heart of Europe. All delegates and guests will receive an impulse that they will translate into concrete peace projects back home.

The “Ring for Peace” is a so-called Möbius band, a mathematical wonder. The strip has only one side, and there is no distinction between inside and outside. It represents the idea, the vision and the mission of Religions for Peace and will remain in Lindau permanently as an invitation for future interreligious meetings.